

# Medill Reports Chicago



## WEST SIDERS TRAIN FOR NEW LIFE

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By Mengjie (Jessie) Jiang

When Zachary Wright, 23, quit his job as a burger maker at McDonald's six months ago and enrolled in Bethel New Life's advanced manufacturing training program, he was thinking of his next 30 years.

"I got tired of it because I didn't see it as a stable career. They wanted me to become a manager, but how fast everything in the food industry has been changing lately?" Wright said. "I didn't see the same benefits as coming from a career where I'm making parts for machinery. There is certainty in the manufacturing industry where you need a person to run the machine because all the details are very close and they need to be pinpointed."

Wright said he is able to graduate at the end of February and is waiting for his background check result before starting work as a Computer Numerical Control operator for BWAY Corp., a Chicago rigid metal containers producer.

"They said we want to bring you in here because you know our factory and we can move you around. You don't have to stay in one spot, we can use you in multiple parts of the factory, which is better for me because if I'm able to be used in more than one spot that guarantees that I'm always going to have work," Wright said.

Lyons-based Atlas Tool & Die Works Inc. has hired six students from the program as entry-level machine operators to meet sales growth. Zach Mottl, the fourth-generation owner of Atlas, said they earn an average of \$25,000 to \$30,000 a year and are in the company's long-term training plan.

"The candidates that we've hired, they come work-ready and show up to work on time and they know the expectations of having a good job and those soft skills," Mottl said. "They also have some basic hard-skill training. They have some machine training, they know how to use inspection tools, they have some safety training."

Three years ago, Bethel New Life, a Chicago West Side non-profit organization, launched its advanced manufacturing program, providing manufacturing skills and supportive career training for community residents at no cost. Edward A. Coleman, president and CEO of Bethel New Life, said it aims to improve the quality of lives on the West Side through economic transformation.



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*Bethel New Life was formed by a small Lutheran church on the West Side of Chicago in response to the devastation and disinvestment that followed the civil rights upheaval of the late 1960s. (Mengjie Jiang/MEDILL)*

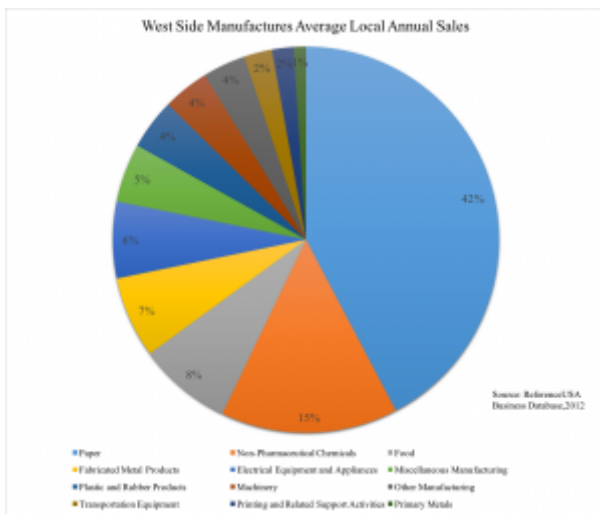
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Coleman said roughly 100 students have graduated from the program with a 70-80 percent graduation rate and an 80-90 percent placement rate. Average hourly wage is \$14.

Coleman declined to reveal the total cost of the program, but said “a typical organization would spend about \$7,000 per participant.” Most of Bethel’s funding comes from private sources including foundations, corporations and individual contributors.

The West Side neighborhoods of Austin, Lawndale and Garfield Park were a strong manufacturing hub decades ago due to vast lands available for building manufacturing facilities and close economic relationships between manufacturers, Coleman said.

The West Side was home to more than 200 manufacturing businesses, producing annual sales around \$1.5 billion and employing nearly 9,000, according to a West Side Manufacturing White Paper released by Bethel New Life in 2012.



*Although paper products manufacturers accounted for only 2.6 percent of all manufacturers in the West Side, these few businesses produced nearly \$45 million in annual sales. (Mengjie Jiang/MEDILL)*

However, in time more convenient transportation and abundant land in Northwest Chicago made the West Side less attractive, and more recently advances in robotics and machinery mean that work that previously required hundreds of people at an assembly line is now produced by only a handful of skilled workers who understand the intricacies of a CNC router.

In the past 15 years, the Chicago region and state lost approximately 30 percent of nearly 170,000 manufacturing jobs, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning reported early this month. Lower-skilled jobs represented most of the losses; only 38 percent of the manufacturing jobs lost were deemed advanced.

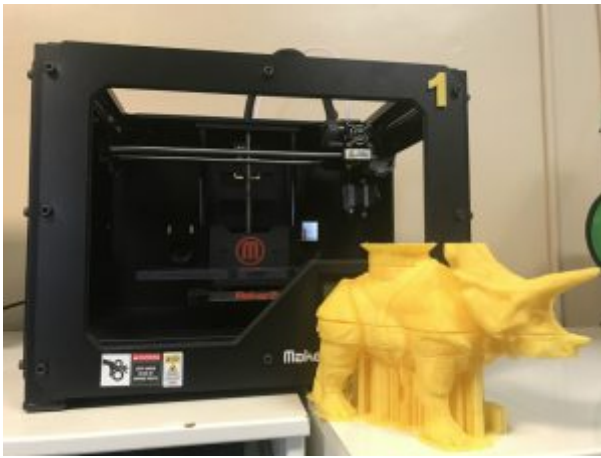
“Bethel manufacturing is one of the workforce development skill-set areas which we decided a number of years ago would help people pursue the opportunities to acquire credentials and certifications in advanced manufacturing,” Coleman said. “You don’t need a college degree or you might have even spent some time in a prison, and even with that type of background you can still pursue a career in advanced manufacturing.”

Although the program is open to all adults, Roxanne Charles, Bethel’s director of workforce development, said applicants need to pass math and reading exams and take interviews to make sure that they are able and determined to complete the program. The 22-week program is held three times a year, and from an average of 21 applicants, eight to 10 students will be admitted in each session.

In the latest session, started in October, two teachers at Schaumburg-based Technology and Manufacturing Association conducted CNC level-one operator training from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. every

Monday and Wednesday.

Adapting to the automation trend in manufacturing, the program focuses on the technology aspect of manufacturing.



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*A 3D-printing model rhinoceros made by students.  
The manufacturing program is technology-heavy.  
(Mengjie Jiang/MEDILL)*

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“The new trend is computer and everything is computer-related,” said Jack Krikorian, TMA instructor. “The machines understand a certain language, much like a computer program understands a certain language, so what we do is we teach them the codes that are needed to run those machines.”

In the first three weeks of pre-manufacturing class, students learn blueprint reading and tool measurement, and then gain hands-on experience in operating a CNC turning machine and a CNC milling machine in the remainder of the program.

Lorayne Williams, 30, who previously was a production worker at Aircom Manufacturing Inc. in Indiana, said the program is a good add-on for her resume.

“I didn’t think it was going to be really in details,” Williams said. “With Jack, he taught us in the classroom, but at the same time, it always corresponded with what he was teaching us, and what we learned in the classroom we actually went out and did on the machine.”

In order to graduate, students need to earn CNC credentials in lathe, mill and safety as well as acquiring a National Institute for Metalworking Skills certification.

Apart from hard skill training, every Tuesday students are also taught resume and cover letter writing, job search and interviewing strategies as part of employment readiness training at Bethel New Life.

Akilah McCord, workforce development trainer and coordinator at Bethel, said the job training is to bridge manufacturing skills and ideal jobs.

“We do resume planning, and we make sure that their skill-set is in alignment with the jobs they are looking for,” McCord said. “Once my students feel they are reaching a certain level and we feel them reaching a certain level, we can begin introducing those students to those potential employers.”

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*Photo at top: Lorayne Williams operates a CNC milling machine at the training facility of the Technology & Manufacturing Association in Schaumburg. (Mengjie Jiang/MEDILL)*

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